



# Building Environmental Health Services Workforce Capacity

## WHAT IS THE HEALTH ISSUE?

- New and emerging issues (e.g., highly toxic wastes, terrorism, newly discovered diseases) have arisen at a time when state and local environmental and emergency health services capacities are limited.
- Local environmental health practitioners are the “frontline troops” in the public health battle to prevent disease, yet many have no formal training in environmental health or public health. Only 23 accredited undergraduate and 3 accredited graduate programs exist in the field of environmental health.
- In 2000, an estimated 19,431 people made up the environmental health workforce employed by local health departments, a small percentage of the total public health workforce which continues to shrink, further diminishing workforce capacity.
- Environmental health practitioners have inadequate resources to determine the role the environment plays in disease transmission and some programs at the state and local level do not have the capacity to use the essential public health service approach to solve environmental health problems.
- State and local environmental health programs do not have performance standards, and their activities may not coincide with community needs.

## WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC provides funding and technical assistance to public health agencies, associations, and universities to establish programs for developing a competent and effective environmental health services workforce. Following are recent examples:

- Funded the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs to expand the number of accredited programs teaching environmental health and to increase the number of graduates.
- Funded Tulane University and the University of Washington to develop training modules based on environmental sciences and public health for practitioners entering the field. Tulane University developed 24 Web-based training modules related to drinking water, lead poisoning prevention, vector control, chemical terrorism and introduction to toxicology, and environmental services in Louisiana. The University of Washington developed an interactive training CD-ROM, Essential Services of Environmental Health, which will be mailed to approximately 4,000 state, local, and tribal environmental health officers.
- Partnered with the American Public Health Association to sponsor the Environmental Health Competency Project, which outlines core competencies needed by environmental health practitioners to anticipate, recognize, and respond to environmental health challenges.
- Launched an environmental health leadership institute. The first group of students has been recruited and will begin coursework in 2005.

## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

- Create an environmental health problem-solving methodology for environmental health practitioners.
- Develop the National Environmental Health Services Corps modeled after the Epidemic Intelligence Service. This two-year program would teach and implement problem-solving methodology as part of a state or local field assignment.
- Create and promote the use of environmental health performance standards, based on the 10 essential public health services to state and local programs.